

Art, Poetry and Monasticism

Douai Talk

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In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Eugene says 'It was a great mistake my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home.

Who does not really want and is not really wanted . . .

His father replies: Yes, there's the makings of a poet in you all right.

Eugene: The makings of a poet. No. I'm afraid I'm like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn't got the makings. He's got only the habit . . . Stammering is the natural eloquence of us fog people.'

Many of us might feel that we are poets in monastic life, but this is not the kind of poetry which is at issue here.

Ezra Pound puts it this way: 'I believe in everyone writing poetry who wants to; most do. I believe in every man knowing enough music to play "God Bless our Home" on the harmonium, but I do not believe in every man giving concerts and printing his sin . . . It is tremendously important that great poetry be written, it makes no jot of difference who writes it'. The term 'great' when applied to poetry can be misunderstood. What I am talking about here is a kind of poetry that explores. 'The poet', to use T.S. Eliot's phrase, 'is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist'. This is consciousness before and after it enters the idiom of rational thought. Consciousness is not just in and from the mind. It pervades our total presence. The mind is certainly an important part of the poetic act but it is

only one element. The kind of poetry I am referring to is 'metaphysical' in the terminology of Hart Crane, because it records 'absolute experience':

Such a poem is at least a stab at the truth, and to such an extent may be differentiated from other kinds of poetry and called 'absolute'. Its evocation will not be toward decoration or amusement, but rather toward a state of consciousness, an 'innocence' (Blake) or absolute beauty. In this condition there may be discoverable under new forms certain spiritual illuminations shining with a morality essentialised from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or pre-conceptions. It is as though a poem gave the reader as he left it a single new word, never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness

We have emerged after about a hundred years or more from a heritage of repository art which was sold internationally and cluttered our churches with what is known as *kitsch*, a German word for trash, meaning in this context mass-produced statues, pictures, ornaments, pastiche and plaster reproductions of classical models, which in their sentimental gaudy sameness are the antithesis of original works of art.

Milan Kundera has defined Kitsch as 'the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence'. It is not so much its inherent ugliness which repels it is rather 'the mask of beauty it tries to wear':

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitude can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories. . . . Kitsch causes two tears to flow. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

What Kundera means by ‘totalitarian’ kitsch, where ‘all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions’, is a situation where everything that ‘infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: every display of individualism (because deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood)’; every doubt, all irony (because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously)’¹

Both James White, the late Irish historian and art critic, and Marie-Alain Couturier, the Dominican priest responsible in the fifties for the building of such beautiful and inspirational churches as those in Audincourt, Assy, Ronchamp and Vence, in which he commissioned the leading architects and painters of his generation such as Chagall, Matisse and Rouault, are agreed that ‘to keep Christian art alive, every generation must appeal to its own masters of living art’ as ‘nothing is born or reborn except from life – not even tradition’. ‘It is impossible’ says White ‘to commission works of art under too precise instructions or requirements’. Obviously whoever is paying for it is permitted to give a detailed description of the kind of work they have in mind. However, ‘there is no such thing as religious art, ecclesiastical art or liturgical art. These are merely terms denoting works of art, the subject matter of which puts them into special categories. Never before has art been more concerned with the spiritual than it is now’.²

Naturally, we are idealistic, we are sentimental. We love to sit and watch a good old-fashioned movie, where everybody is patriotic, every soldier is courageous, every priest is celibate, every bride is a virgin, every marriage is forever, every dog is everlasting, every hero is noble, upright, pure, and looks you straight in the eye. All that Enid Blyton, Beatrix [or maybe these days Harry] Potter, Biggles, Boy's Own, and

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable lightness of Being*, Faber & Faber, London, 1990, p 249-278.

² James White, ‘Artists Role’ *The Furrow* 13.642.

Hollywood brought us up on. 'Blue skies, smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see'. We want the world to be like Disneyland, no matter how obviously and how consistently it is revealed to us as the opposite. And even though our 'post-modern' culture, linked to all-pervasive, importunate, brash, unavoidable and incontrovertible communications technology, shows us all our heroes and every idol in the grim light of their human frailty we still want the fairytale. Art is trying to show us something different, something other. And yet it is true to say that its only real purpose is to show us what really is. It is not invention it is revelation, vision of what actually is there before our eyes if we could see it. But, the truth is that we are blinded. Our vision is myopic, impeded, reduced. What we see is what we want to see. And so, even our 'art' is reduced to our own size. We like it to be comfortable. We also like our religious art to be confirming and supportive: Chocolate box Christianity. Our set might include Rembrandt's Prodigal's Son, Millais The Angelus, Leonardo's Last Supper, Botticelli's Virgins, a cluster of Raphael's and a magnum of Murillo's.

So, when we talk about the connection between art and religion, the first possibility at the most basic level is clearance of vision. Art teaches us, or tries to teach us, how to see what is, rather than what is real for us. It tries to dispel the innate blindness of vision that religion also tries to dispel. In this way, some artists are prophets. In the Gospel of Mark Chapter 8 v 22f. there is the account of a miracle where Jesus cures a blind man. 'So He took him by the hand and led him outside the village. Then putting spittle in his eyes and laying His hands on him He asked, "Can you see anything?" And the man who was beginning to see replied: "I can see people like trees walking." And He laid his hands on the man's eyes again and he saw clearly . . . and he could see everything plainly and distinctly.' This account says graphically the potential connection

between religion and art. Our normal vision is like a telescopic lens on a double-barrelled shot-gun, if it fixes our sights on what we can gobble, gerrymander or grab. Art can educate us to approach things as they are in themselves and it can open both us and the world around us to the dimension of the spirit.

Valentinus [Gnostic Master]: Jesus ate & drank but did not defecate.

Long live life!

Poetry in the real sense of the word is our only way forward, spiritually in destitute times. Yeats sees the artist as having a prophetic role in the unfolding of history's direction. In Synge's art, for instance, he saw 'the roots of far-branching events'. Where does such art come from? From that place, Yeats tells us, 'where the monks found God, in the depths of the mind'.² Art should provide the form of truth which the future might assume at the beginning of each epoch.

The twentieth century happened in Paris in the 1920s, says Gertrude Stein. She was referring, no doubt, to all the artists who were exiled from elsewhere and who ended up in the only place that would take them in. There are two kinds of time. There is chronological time and creative time. When we suggest that the Twentieth century happened in Paris we are saying two things: the century we have just been through, probably the cruellest and most devastating the planet has survived, began its march. But we are also saying that there were artists who foretold what would emerge, forestalled perhaps, or mitigated its full impact somewhat, and helped us to survive it. They sowed seeds for an alternative version and the enduring monuments they left have survived. These enduring works of art give us further opportunity to reestablish ourselves as their

² W.B. Yeats: *Essays and Introductions*, London, 1961, Pp 330-341.

beneficiaries by becoming their contemporaries even if somewhat belatedly a hundred years later.

Roger Casement(1864-1916) sent a report to the British Government about the inhuman treatment, the barbaric exploitation of what was then the Belgian Congo, at the beginning of the century. He was British Consul in the Congo (1901-1904). James Conrad is supposed to have read this report, although it was only published in 1904, and, whether he read it or not, wrote Heart of Darkness, published in 1902. In a letter of 1895 Conrad says: 'All my work is produced unconsciously (so to speak) and . . . it isn't in me to improve what has got itself written'. This kind of art is inspired. It comes from a depth where its authorship is no longer quite traceable.' T.S.Eliot read Conrad's book. He wrote The Wasteland, from a corresponding place in his own beleaguered unconscious in 1922, between the two world wars:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

'It is only through the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us', says Jung in his 'Answer to Job',³ 'but we are unable to distinguish whether these actions emanate from God or from the unconscious. We cannot tell whether God and the unconscious are two different entities.

³ C. G. Jung 'Answer to Job', Complete Works[CW]: Vol. Psychology and Religion in East and West, Bollingen, Pp 468-470.

Both are border-line concepts for transcendental contents'. Jung is not saying, as he has so often been accused of saying, that God does not exist, or that God is a creation of the unconscious. He is saying that it is empirically impossible to distinguish between the 'God-image' and 'the archetype of the self' even though we can 'arbitrarily postulate a difference between these two entities, but that does not help us at all'. For all practical purposes, he thinks, we must remain agnostic on this point, since our conscious minds are the only way in which we can formulate the possible connections which happen in the unconscious beneath any radar screen to which we have conscious access. The reason for this impossibility has nothing to do with God it is entirely to do with the inaccessibility of the unconscious. We have no idea what happens, or who's who, down there.

However, for the purposes of this investigation, it is from the unconscious that all great spiritual or religious art emanates. It does not come from a conscious embracing of religious creeds or principles; nor does it arise from implementation of a strategic religious plan, a propagation of a particular set of credal formulae, or the adoption of a specific code of religious conduct.

Art of this kind is truth entering history and emerging in a recognizable and durable work. Art of this kind is theology. It does not merely illustrate a theology. It is itself a theological act or deed. It is God actively involved in the work: divine energy. The word 'energy' comes from the Greek, *en ergon*, meaning 'in the work'. It is God's Spirit at work. Such truth does not come to us, it comes through us. We do not open up the truth; we are the opening through which truth can announce itself. It does this through language; not language as a tool of ours which we can manipulate but language as a river in which we swim. Truth seeps

into our pores, starting from the feet. It cleaves us in two and breathes through us in song. We are torn and turned upside down before this can happen. And it can only happen through individual people. It doesn't come through a group or result from a seminar. As Rudolf Steiner has said famously of Goethe: 'Truth is always only individual truth of significant human beings.'

Such truth emerging in significant word is poetry of the deepest kind. It is what Rilke calls 'heartwork'.

Work of sight is achieved,
now for some heart-work
on all those images, prisoned within you; for you
overcame them, but do not know them as yet.

This 'turning' or conversion required to become an artist of the other order, Rilke calls it the angelic order, is a reversal of our normal stance. The artist has to hang upside down like the hanged man in the Tarot cards. A scooped out turnip with a candle inside. The head is buried in the earth and the feet become explorers of the rhythm. Iambic pentameter: the Greek words refer to the rhythm of the lines as the language reverberates through the poet. Iamb is a foot and the metre is measured according to the number of times the footbeats hit the earth. Wordsworth and Coleridge walked all their poetry into the earth: pedestrians. Humility is the virtue or the fundamental attitude required. The word also comes from the Latin word humus meaning earth. Dancing is the original medium. It is the unconscious movement of the whole body from the ground upwards. Remember Synge on the Aran Islands:⁴

⁴ J.M.Synge: Four Plays and The Aran Islands, London, 1962, p 222.

Last night, after walking in a dream among buildings with a strangely intense light on them, I heard a faint rhythm of music beginning far away on some stringed instrument.

It came closer to me, gradually increasing in quickness and volume with an irresistibly definite progression. When it was quite near the sound began to move in my nerves and blood, and to urge me to dance with them.

In a moment I was swept away in a whirlwind of notes. My breath and my thoughts and every impulse of my body, became a form of the dance, till I could not distinguish between the instruments and the rhythm and my own person or consciousness.

In his 1970 Nobel lecture, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918-) distinguished between two kinds of artist: 'One artist sees himself as the creator of an independent spiritual world: he hoists onto his shoulders the task of creating this world, of peopling it and of bearing the all-embracing responsibility for it . . . Another artist, recognizing a higher power above, gladly works as a humble apprentice beneath God's heaven.'

Inspiration of the kind I am detecting here means thinking together. It means a kind of artistry which is both active and passive at the same time. The Greek language had a grammatical term for this, a middle voice. We have lost both the grammar and the practice. For us everything is either active or passive. Either I kick you or I am kicked. Either I compose this piece or somebody else composes it. Inspiration is more than I think, or I compose. Two sources, two simultaneous currents mingle and unite wherever you have authentic inspiration of the second kind.

Great art of the second kind which allows God's creative spirit to take shape in the world, requires humility. We have to yield to this spirit, we have to give up our copyright, our exclusive rights as authors, our signature at the bottom of the painting or at the end of the book. It means diminishing myself so that the other source of inspiration may increase.

Such a task can only be achieved by a dedicated and subtle dialogue between poetry and thinking. Such a dialogue is neither the creation of poetry by thinkers, nor is it the formulation of ideologies by poets. It is the recognition by both that we are living in destitute times when all the structures we have created, all the languages we have learnt, and all the 'truths' which we have believed to be fundamental, have somehow proved themselves inadequate to the task of catering for our common future.

In such circumstances the role of the artist becomes essential. And the task of 'thinkers' is to listen and to learn. The sobering lesson of these destitute times is that we have become almost irretrievably estranged from our potential future by the ideological constructs of our various pasts. To extricate ourselves from this war of worlds it is not enough to invent yet one more illusory utopia, it is essential to re-establish contact with the reality of what we are, with the truth of history, even if it has to find words which are beyond the vocabulary of all the languages we currently know how to speak. We are not necessarily determined by some inexorable flow of history. We can stop the world and redirect it, if we have sufficient understanding and imagination both to point out the better way and to make it compelling enough to accomplish. Art is an original truth of this kind: it can reveal the way towards a more sensitive future.

In the combination required to achieve such an event, the poets have one role and the thinkers another. This does not mean that thinkers are trying to abuse poetry and make it into fodder for philosophy. It means that 'there would be, and there is, the sole necessity, by thinking our way soberly into what the poetry says, to come to learn what is unspoken.'⁵

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought*, op. cit., p. 96.

Poetry is neither purposeful, rational creation by the conscious ego, nor is it impersonal, atavistic energy from the unconscious. It is the means whereby we can attain to another centre, a psychic space, which otherwise remains inaccessible. Jung puts it this way:⁶

The centre of the total personality no longer coincides with the ego, but with a point midway between the conscious and the unconscious. This would be the point of a new equilibrium, a new centering of the total personality, a virtual centre which, on account of its focal position between conscious and unconscious ensures for the personality a new and more solid foundation.

Which does not mean that it belongs to the domain of psychology, or that it can be reached by some science or method other than a certain kind of art. It is an ontological space giving access to the transcendent which goes beyond the psychology of the individual. The artist, the poet, can provide access to this space by accomplishing a certain kind of poetic form. It is through the brokenness and vulnerability of such artists that 'history' and culture can cooperate as both continuity and rupture. Art is original. Whenever it happens a new era begins. The poet allows him or her self to be the filter of something beyond that self, something transcendent. This means that the poetry is not the work of their own hands entirely; but it does not mean that they are taken over by some impersonal or sacral force. The original source is open to what is beyond the autonomous powers of the poet's creative activity.

There has to be a place where such inspiration can be received, distilled, distributed more universally and expeditiously to allow the evolutionary purpose of the planet to keep apace with contemporaneity. Otherwise we are always playing catch-up, or clear-up after disasters accruing from having made the wrong move. The Spirit can only move at

our pace. There is, there has to be, a constant regrouping, reformulation of strategy, performance of running repairs on a continually sabotaged rescue operation. Some bulwark has to be created which can shore up the gameplan already accomplished and provide a runway for the next series of test flights.

Monasteries should provide such places. In Russia, for instance, 200 kilometres south of Moscow, Optina Pustyn was the last great refuge of the hermitic tradition that connected Russia with Byzantium and which came to be regarded as a spiritual centre. All the great writers of the 19th century – Gogol, Dostoievsky and Tolstoy among them – went there in their search for the ‘Russian soul.’ Unless we dwell poetically on this earth, we are strangers here, and we abuse our environment. Dwelling requires obedience to the earth, humility, stability: an established yet open space.

Monasteries should be listening ears for the world around, an essential part of any society, providing touchstones with our deeper selves, with nature, with God. *Ausculata*, the Latin word for 'Listen,' is the first word in the Rule of Benedict. Monasteries should act as beehives of the invisible, distilling wisdom from many sources, searching out new cultural perspectives: ways of hearing, seeing, being in touch with, life at many levels.

A compelling image is Seamus Heaney’s in a poem of his own which he quoted when receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995.⁷

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep

⁶ C.G.Jung, CW Vol 7, p 221.

⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground, Poems 1966-1996*, Faber & Faber, London, 1998, p 364.

It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

The poet here, in his own words, is struggling with 'contradictory allegiances . . . to the numinous and to the matter-of-fact', two dimensions which must receive equal attention if our passage to the future is to be rooted and on course. All the success in the world will be sawdust and tinsel unless our connection with the depths of our own reality and the reality of the marvellous is maintained. This can be done if the role which monks and artists can and must play, is preserved in tact, and if a fruitful connection is established between them.

'On you go now! Run, son, like the devil
And tell your mother to try
To find me a bubble for the spirit level⁸

Monasteries can act as bubbles for the Spirit level. Such bubbles are 'beyond' our 'psychic space' and unattainable unless 'I thought of walking round and round a space/ utterly empty, utterly a source/ . . . Silent, beyond silence listened for'.

Two 'ministers' are involved in such relocation and reappropriation: artists and monks. Artists provide the elements for transfiguration. Monks are sentinels. 'The people of the country select one of themselves and post this person as a sentry'. The job is to sound a horn to alert us when anything strange or dangerous is near. 'I have

appointed you as sentry. When you hear a word from my mouth, warn them in my name’.

About the Clonmacnoise space-ship story Heaney says: ‘I take it to be pure story. It has the entrancement of a narrative that's mysterious and absolute. It needs no explanation but even so, you could read it as a text about the necessity of being in two places at the one time, on the ground with the fatherly earthiness, but also keeping your mind open and being able to go up with the kite, on the magic carpet too, and live in the world of fantasy. To live in either world entirely and resolutely, and not to shift, is risky. For your wholeness you need to inhabit both worlds.’

Another poem of Seamus Heaney called ‘The Forge’ describes the way in which we approach the door into the dark of the future.

Somewhere near the centre of this forge there is an anvil which he describes as an altar, ‘set there immovable’ on which real iron can be beaten out and the shape and music of the future can be sketched. If we are to establish a future which can house us adequately we too have to find such an altar. Forging the future requires the right kind of relationship with the true Spirit of the living God. Without this the future will be a shortsighted and inadequate one.

Two presences are required to ensure that the form of the future is a genuine one emerging from local culture. Those who know about this culture and understand its length and breadth, its height and depth, must combine with the genuinely contemplative to ensure that a dynamic equivalence is maintained between what we are now and what we become in the future. All of which might be maintained through the dialogue which must happen between artists and the Church. Artists must follow the anchor hooked into the altar rails. Much has to change, many anachronisms need to be discarded, many superstitions purified, many

⁸ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Errand’ *The Spirit Level*, Faber & Faber, London, 1996, p 54.

fears allayed. We are a different, more affluent, better educated population than ever before. We need a relationship with God and an understanding of Christianity which would correspond to and connect with the reality of who we are. Artists have always claimed to be in touch with the people, their art found its source in this reality, which was often the reason why it was condemned in the past. The dialogue between who we are and who Christ is will lead us all to a fuller and more comprehensive way of being. Louis MacNeice suggests its tentativeness in his poem 'Coda':

But what is that clinking in the darkness?
Maybe we shall know each other better
When the tunnels meet beneath the mountain.

Hearing the possible direction of our heartbeat of the present; feeling our way towards the place where a possible escape-route, a breakthrough might occur; being sensitive to promptings from the *Zeitgeist*, the Spirit of the times, this is the demanding heartwork of the artist, who sketches improvisations on such possibilities for us to go by and act upon. Art hears, sees, imagines the possibilities which nature resists with all its might. 'Mankind still has a delicate ear.' This is not evolution in terms of some external irresistible force relentlessly pursuing its preordained purpose; rather, it is tentative advance through sensitive cooperation between the Spirit of possibility and the ingenuity of the actual. The two great thwarters of any such imaginative advance are paralysing smugness on the one hand and ungrounded ideology on the other.